Theophilos of Alexandria (c. 345 – 15 October 412)

Article submitted for the *Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* ed. by D. Hunter (October 2018, forthcoming)

Little is known of the life of Theophilos prior to his election as the successor of Timotheos of Alexandria upon the latter's death on 20 July 385. In the seventh century, John of Nikiu identified Memphis as the city where Theophilos was born and brought up (*Chronicle* 79). Around 370, he was probably serving as a deacon under Athanasios, which would mean that Theophilos' active ministry at Alexandria spanned more than four decades until his death on 15 October 412 (Sokrates, *EH* 7.7).

When Theophilos became the new archbishop of Alexandria in 385, Christians formed a major part of the population of nearly 200,000 inhabitants. His jurisdiction extended over 100 bishops spread across the whole of Egypt and Libya. In the summer of 391, this powerful position was further consolidated by imperial legislation prohibiting pagan sacrifices and public access to the temples in Egypt (*Cod. Theod*. 16.10.11). Within a year, numerous sites were destroyed, including the Alexandrian temples of Dionysios and Mithras as well as the famous shrine of Serapis. There is no agreement in the sources on the role played by Theophilos in the affair—some claiming that the demolition had been specified in a special instruction from the emperor (Sozomen, *EH* 7.15), while others seeing it as the result of Theophilos' own initiative (Thedoret, *EH* 5.22). The latter is also the preferred explanation for authors hostile to the Christians, such as Eunapios (*Life of the Philosophers* 6.11). The law of the emperor Theodosios, however, had targeted sacrifices which were not central to the cult of Serapis (its most distinguishing feature was the annual procession with the image of the god). Entry into the temples for religious purposes, as well as processions around them, were prohibited as well, but there is no indication that the emperor had ordered the destruction of any buildings as such. In an attempt to answer potential objections that the bishop had destroyed the Serapeum without permission, Sokrates says that the emperor had issued the order at the request of Theophilos (*EH* 5.16-17. No trace of such legislation, however, has survived. According to Rufinus of Aquileia, a group of pagan religious rebels had barricaded themselves in the temple of Serapis in protest against earlier attacks by Christians (*EH* 11.22-23; also Sozomen who mentions the exposure of cultic *phalli*, *EH*

7.15). In the riots that followed, some Christians were killed which prompted the emperor to intervene. He only ruled that the Serapeum should be closed and that the victims were to be honored as martyrs for the Christian faith, granting full amnesty to the rebels. As a consequence of the imperial intervention, however, the Christians were granted the site. What followed was the destruction of the image of Serapis and, at a somewhat later stage, the conversion of the building into a church named after the emperor Arkadios. The new Christianized complex was completed, when Theophilos brought relics of St. John the Baptist from Palestine for the consecration of the church and established a monastic community to take care of it. Although the exact date of these events is still a matter of scholarly dispute (see Hahn for a dating in 392), it is clear that what occurred in Alexandria was part of a large-scale anti-pagan activity which took place across the Mediterranean at the end of the fourth century (Fowden). In the case of Theophilos, it is incorrect to argue that his actions were simply an outburst of personal religious fanaticism. His leadership was marked by a degree of flexibility which is often left unexamined in earlier characterizations of his episcopacy. Edward Gibbon thus called Theophilos "a bold, bad man, whose hands were alternately polluted with gold and with blood" (*Decline and Fall*, I, 103). Evidence for a more nuanced assessment is found in Theophilos' decision to ordain the philosopher Synesios as metropolitan bishop of Ptolemais (Barnes argues for 406, Liebeschuetz 1986—for 411). Synesios had been one of Hypatia's pupils and was in correspondence with Theophilos (*Letters* 9, 66-69, 76, 80). Prior to his ordination, Synesios asked Theophilos to allow him to continue with his study of Hellenic philosophy without an obligation to preach doctrines he himself did not believe in, such as the Christian belief that the world would have an end. This apparently did not present a problem for Theophilos who was also prepared to allow Synesios to remain married to his wife (*Letter* 105; Bregman). Had he been a fanatic, it is difficult to explain why Synesios would have felt he could put forward his conditions to Theophios in the first place, or why the patriarch would have agreed to ordain him.

On the international level, Theophilos applied all his energy to defend Alexandria's traditional role as the leading see in the East. The council of Constantinople in 381 had granted the bishop of the New Rome "primacy of honor after the bishop of Rome" (Canon 3). The first opportunity Theophilos had to challenge the new order was in the summer of 390. Writing to the emperor Theodosios, he presented a table of the dates of Easter, thus discretely

emphasizing his role as adviser for the whole Church: "For it was necessary even in your blessed times for the reliable date of the divine Pascha to be established by diligent examination in the Alexandrian Church, which, in offering up constant prayers for you, desires your name to remain in perpetuity amongst all people" (CPG II, 2675; ET: Russell, 82; also Mosshammer, 49). The recognition of respective spheres of authority, with the necessary deference on the part of Theophilos, indicates a more even balance of power compared to the earlier times of Athanasios. Theophilos clearly began his ministry with greater confidence in using the institutional and legal instruments at his disposal and was soon invited to adjudicate in ecclesiastical controversies outside of Egypt. His expertise in canon law helped to resolve the schisms over episcopal succession at Bostra in Arabia and at Antioch in Syria. He also mediated in a dispute in Palestine where the passions of the chief protagonists had been additionally stirred by the theological quarrel over Origen's legacy. It had all started in 393 when Epiphanios of Cyprus, preaching at Jerusalem, denounced the local bishop John as an "origenist". The situation became more problematic in 394 when Epiphanios ordained Paulinianus, the brother of Jerome, for the latter's monastic community at Bethlehem. The ordination had not been approved by John of Jerusalem whose response was to condemn Jerome and his monks and to threaten them with expulsion from Palestine. After an unsuccessful attempt by the civil governor to intervene, John appealed to Theophilos for support. In his letters to John and Jerome, Theophilos repeatedly emphasized that subordination to the judgement of the local bishop should take priority. At Pentecost 396, he sent Isidoros, a trusted presbyter who had earlier served under Athanasios, to Palestine to work out a plan for reconciliation. Upon arrival, however, Isidoros took the side of John and refused to read out Theophilos' letter in Jerome's presence. Jerome considered the case to have been prejudged and refused to cooperate (*Against John* 39; PL 23, 391 A). Despite the failed embassy, Theophilos wrote again and managed to persuade Jerome to submit and be reconciled with John (his letter is lost but Jerome refers to it in reply, *Letter* 82).

Distinguished by these achievements, in February 398 Theophilos journeyed to Constantinople to take part in the ordination of the next archbishop of the city. His own preferred candidate was Isidoros, but the court favored instead John Chrysostom. Theophilos was outmaneuvered and in the end had to take part in John's consecration. After this political disappointment he returned to Egypt where he found himself challenged on an issue of

theology which would eventually strain his relationship with Chrysostom beyond repair. In his Easter letter of 399, the text of which has not reached us, Theophilos appears to have written against anthropomorphism, condemning the view that God had a human body (John Cassian, *Conferences* 10.2; Sokrates, *EH* 6.7). According to Sozomen, this provoked crowds of monks to gather before his residence demanding an explanation and, eventually, forcing Theophilos to change sides and condemn the books of Origen instead (*EH* 8.11). Earlier on, when supporting John of Jerusalem, he had not made any pronouncements for or against Origen—keeping his involvement limited to deciding on questions of ecclesiastical order. Now he was forced to enter the theological debate as well. Theophilos offered his own version of the events in his *Synodal Letter to the Bishops of Palestine and Cyprus* from the autumn of 400 (CPG II, 2596). The narrative he gives there seeks to absolve him of personal responsibility: a council of bishops and monastic leaders had gathered in Nitria where excerpts of Origen's books were read and the following positions ascribed to him and condemned: subordination of the Son to the Father, denial of the resurrection of the body, the belief that the devil can be saved, the view that souls have their origin in the pre-cosmic fall, and the affirmation that the power of the Holy Spirit is limited only to rational creatures. The aim of the *Synodal Letter* was to alert Theophilos' episcopal colleagues abroad not to receive in ecclesiastical communion the monks who had fled Egypt after their condemnation as adherents to these errors. Further details of Theophilos' polemic can be seen in his Easter letters, especially those for the years 400–404 written at the heat of the controversy and preserved in full in Jerome's Latin translation (CPG II, 2585–2586, 2588).

The leaders of the monks attacked by Theophilos were the so-called "Tall brothers" as well as Isidoros, his former confidant, who may have been putting himself forward as next in line for the archiepiscopal throne (see Fatti). Finding no lasting shelter in Palestine, the fugitive monks eventually reached Constantinople where they presented their complaints to John Chrysostom. John received them and wrote to Theophilos but the mediation was firmly rejected. Theophilos appealed instead to the Nicene definition of the boundaries of ecclesiastical authority: "I think you are not unaware of the ordinance of the Nicene canons forbidding a bishop to adjudicate a case which falls outside his ecclesiastical area. If, however, you are unaware, now that you have been informed refrain from meddling with accusations brought against me. If it were necessary for me to be put on trial, it would be

before Egyptian judges and not before you, who live more than seventy-five days' journey away" (Palladios, *Dial*. 7.132–37; ET: Kelly, 199–200). Cornered in this way, Chrysostom advised the monks to be reconciled with their bishop as well as with his supporters in the capital. The fugitives, however, in a desperate attempt to seek justice, turned to the secular authorities. On the feast of St. John the Baptist (24 June 402), they succeeded in presenting the imperial couple their petitions against Theophilos. The augusta took the side of the monks and, according to Palladios, moved the government to issue an imperial order summoning Theophilos to appear before an ecclesiastical court at Constantinople (*Dial*. 8.9–29). A senior magistrate, the chief of the imperial curriers Elaphios, was sent to Egypt to bring Theophilos—willing or unwilling—to face trial before an ecclesiastical court at Constantinople. His agents were arrested and the emperor appointed Chrysostom as judge over the whole case.

This was John's unique opportunity but he declined to use it, apparently agreeing with Theophilos' argument for the validity of the canonical order established at Nicaea. "Aware as I was", he later wrote to Pope Innocent, "of the laws of our fathers, respecting and honoring this man, having moreover in my hands a letter of his which demonstrated that judicial cases may not lawfully be tried outside the territory of their origin but that matters affecting each province should properly be settled within that province, I refused to act as his judge, indeed rejected the proposal with the utmost vehemence" (cited in Palladios, *Dial*. 2, ET: Kelly, 215). Theophilos on the other hand took his time to organize a counter offensive. He chose the slower land-route to Constantinople while his supporters, including 29 bishops, travelled by sea. An audience with the empress was arranged for him when he arrived, after which he set up an alternative synod (the "Synod of The Oak") at Chalcedon where the local bishop was also an Egyptian, known for his hostility to Chrysostom. With the help of some of the clergy whom Chrysostom had deposed, Theophilos prepared a dossier, issued four summons (one more than the three required by canon law) and, when John refused to appear, tried him *in absentia*, found him guilty, and deposed him.

As for the Nitrian refugees, those who were still alive—after the hardships of the journey and their sufferings in the capital— recanted of their origenism and were reconciled with

Theophilos. While still in Constantinople, he sent a letter to the monks in Egypt explaining that all along he had consistently fought theological extremes (CPG II, 2612; and also Richard 1975). Earlier on he had appealed to the fugitive monks to accept the decisions of the synods which had condemned Origen at Alexandria and at Rome (CPG II, 2602). The *Tractate on Isaiah* (CPG II, 2683), if it indeed belongs to him, shows that his concern was to steer a middle course between crude anthropomorphism and excessive origenistic allegorism. It is for this moderate doctrinal orthodoxy that Theophilos was remembered by the next generation. The Christology he developed in his anti-origenist letters was used at Chalcedon as a touchstone of orthodoxy. The emperor Marcian, writing to the monks of Alexandria after the council, mentioned him alongside Athanasios (328–373) and Cyril (412–444) as part of an argument that the Council of Chalcedon had followed their teaching and thus made "absolutely no innovations in respect of the apostolic faith" (*ACO* II/1.3, 488-89; ET: Price and Gaddis, III, 154). This posthumous image of Theophilos as one of the imperially sanctioned "holy fathers" contrasts sharply with the accounts by his opponents. A key source here is Palladios whose advocacy, although not successful in rescuing the innocently condemned Chrysostom, is finally responsible for the prevailing negative view of the patriarch (Katos).

Historiography (H1)

It is only in the twentieth century that Theophilos was granted scholarly attention in his own right (see Opitz, Lazatti, Favale, Löhr). As far as English language research is concerned, it is to the labors of Norman Russell (2007) that we are indebted for a complete presentation and translation of the works of Theophilos. This new wave of research has also shown Theophilos making an important contribution to Eucharistic theology, his teaching here anticipating that of his nephew and successor, Cyril. In the concluding section of his *Homily on the Last Supper*, preached in 400, Theophilos affirmed: "We should believe that he [i.e. Christ] remains simultaneously priest and victim, that he is both the one who offers and the one who is offered, that he receives and is distributed" (CPG II, 2617; authorship established by Richard 1937; ET: Russell, 60). Beyond discussions of early Christian doctrine, Theophilos has come into the focus of researchers studying the evolution of episcopal authority in late antiquity (see esp. Rapp, Watts). The renewed appreciation of the complexity of early Egyptian Christianity, including desert monasticism (see Clark, Goehring, Orlandi, Rousseau,

Wipszycka) has in turn made possible more detailed examinations of the rhetorical character and appeal of the sources, including Palladios' *Dialogue on the Life of St. John Chrysostom* (see esp. Katos) and Theophilos' own *Letters* (see Banev). The administrative and theological challenges Theophilos faced are in many ways similar to what Ambrose and Chrysostom had to deal with, in their different contexts and with different degrees of success (see Liebeschuetz 2011). In assessing the overall agenda of the patriarch, the latest research has advanced arguments for a consistent policy aimed at harnessing the energy of the monastic movement to serve the wider need of the church (Russell 2003a, 2003b). In Egyptian Christianity the patriarch is remembered as a worthy successor of Athanasios, fighter against paganism and builder of churches (see Martin).

On the corpus of Theophilos, see the entries in M. Geerard, ed., *Clavis patrum graecorum*, vol. II, Turnhout, 1974, 2580–2684, and the updates in vol. VI: *Supplementum*, 1998, 2585-2681.

Banev, K., *Theophilus of Alexandria and the First Origenist Controversy: Rhetoric and Power,* Oxford, 2015.

Barnes, T. D., "When did Synesius Become Bishop of Ptolemais?" in: *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 27 (1986), 325-329.

Bregman, A., *Synesius of Cyrene, Philosopher and Bishop*, Berkeley, 1982.

Clark, E., *The Origenist Controversy: the Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate*, Princeton, N.J., 1992.

Fatti, F., "'Eretico, condanna Origene!' Confitti di potere ad Alessandria nella tarda antichità," in: *Annali di storia dell'esegesi* 20, 2003, 383-435.

Favale, A., *Teofilo d'Alessandria (386c-412). Scritti, Vita e Dottrina*, Torino, 1958.

Fowden, G., "Bishops and Temples in the Eastern Roman Empire," in: *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. XXIX, 1978, 53-78.

Gibbon, E., *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* London, 1776, repr. 1993.

Goehring, J., *Ascetics, Society and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism*, Harrisburg, PA, 1999.

Hahn, J., “The Conversion of the Cult Statues: The Destruction of the Serapeum 392 AD. and the Transformation of Alexandria into the ‘Christ-Loving’ City,” in: J. Hahn, S. Emmel, U. Gotter, eds., *From Temple to Church: Destruction and Renewal of Local Cultic Topography in Late Antiquity*, Leiden, 2008, 335-65.

Katos, D.S., *Palladius of Helenopolis: The Origenist Advocate,* Oxford, 2011.

Kelly, J.N.D., *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom: Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop,* London, 1995.

Lazzati, G., *Teofilo d’Alessandria,* Milan, 1935.

Liebeschuetz, J.H.W.G., *Ambrose and John Chrysostom. Clerics between Desert and Empire,* Oxford, 2011.

———, “Why Did Synesius Become Bishop of Ptolemais ?” in: *Byzantion* 56, 1986, 180-195.

Löhr, W., “Theophilos von Alexandrien,” in: *Theologische Realenzyclopädie* XXXIII, 2002, 364-68.

Martin, A., “Les églises d'Alexandrie aux 3e et 4e siècles,” in: *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 30, 1984, 211-225.

Mosshammer, A. A. *The Prologues on Easter of Theophilus of Alexandria and [Cyril]*, Oxford, 2017.

Opitz, H.G., “Theophilus von Alexandrien,” in: A. F. von Pauly and G. Wissowa, *Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumwissenschaft*, II 5, Stuttgart, 1934, 2149–2165.

Orlandi, T., “Theophilus of Alexandria in Coptic Literature,” in: *Studia Patristica* XVI, 1985, 100–104.

Price, R. and M. Gaddis, eds. and trans., *The Acts of the Council of Chalcedon,* Liverpool, 2005.

Rapp, C., *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition*, Berkeley, 2005.

Richard, M., “Une homélie de Théophile d’Alexandrie sur l’institution de l’Eucharistie,” in: *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 33, 1937, 46–54. [repr. in: M. Richard, *Opera minora*, Turnhout, 1977, II, No 37].

———, “Nouveaux fragments de Théophile d’Alexandrie: à Mr Hermann Dörries pour son 80e anniversaire,” *Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen*, Göttingen, 1975, II, 57-65 [repr. in: M. Richard, *Opera Minora*, Turnhout, 1977, II, №

39].

Rousseau, P., *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian*, Oxford, 1978.

Russell, N., *Theophilus of Alexandria*, London, 2007.

———, "Bishops and Charismatics in Early Christian Egypt," in: J. Behr, A. Louth and D. Conomos, eds., *Abba: The Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West. Festschrift for Bishop Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia* , Crestwood, NY, 2003[a].

———, "Theophilus and Cyril of Alexandria on the Divine Image: A Consistent Episcopal Policy towards the Origenism of the Desert?", in: L. Perrone, ed., *Origeniana Octava*, Louvain, 2003[b], 939-46.

Watts, E.J., *Riot in Alexandria. Tradition and Group Dynamics in Late Antique Pagan and Christian Communities*, Berkeley, 2010.

Wipszycka, E., *Études sur le christianisme dans l'Egypte de l'antiquité tardive*, Rome, 1996.

Krastu Banev